UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

PROGRAMME: No. 590, recorded 26 April 1995

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THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE MEDIA

On this special edition of World Chronicle, **Ian Williams**, President of the United Nations Correspondents Association, **Joe Sills**, Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, and **François Giuliani**, Director of the Media Division of the UN Department of Public Information, discuss the quality of media coverage of the United Nations, both from the perspective of the media and the perspective of the United Nations.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:01"
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

For 50 years, the United Nations has been in headlines around the world. It's received praise at times, but in recent years it's had at least its fair share of criticism. United Nations officials are regularly grilled by correspondents here in New York, in our offices around the world, and in the field. On this edition of World Chronicle, the shoe is on the other foot. Today, it's the UN's turn to question a representative of the press about how and why they cover the world organization.

Our guest is Ian Williams, President of the United Nations Correspondents Association, which is the umbrella group for the media covering the UN in New York. Mr. Williams also represents *The New York Observer*. Joining me to talk with Mr. Williams are Joe Sills, current Spokesman for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and François Giuliani, Director of the Media Division of the UN Department of Public Information and a former Spokesman for the Secretary-General. Gentlemen, welcome to World Chronicle.

Ian, I guess that everyone -- people, individuals and organizations -- likes to have nice things said about them. They become a little cross and defensive when criticism is addressed to them. I wonder whether perhaps the media have been going a bit overboard, not entirely in criticizing, but in being rather personal in their criticisms. It's one thing to criticize the institution, but it's perhaps a little unfair to criticize -- or use harsh terms, at any rate -- individuals who are trying to do a reasonably good job and in many cases have very little opportunity to respond to the criticisms.

WILLIAMS: Well, there was an old tradition of shooting the messenger when they brought bad news. The UN Charter mentions "We, the peoples", and I regard UN officials as public officials responsible to the peoples of the world. So yes, they're accountable just the way that people in the US Federal Government or the British Government or the French Government are, they're responsible for their actions.

LITTLEJOHNS: But very little opportunity is given to them to respond to these criticisms.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's the problem of the United Nations. They should allow them to respond.

LITTLEJOHNS: No, it's the problem of the media, surely.

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. Usually we've found, when we've approached these people for comments, that sometimes they retreat behind the UN, but other times they try to defend themselves. I've certainly found that. I've made some very harsh criticisms --

GIULIANI: Ian, if I may come in, Michael said nobody likes to hear criticism. All right, nobody likes criticism, but criticism may be warranted. But what about when it's not true? There are many things written about the UN as if the people working here have never read the Charter -- which you just mentioned nicely -- or else have never actually functioned here. You know that the Organization functions in a certain way, and when you talk to a journalist away from the pulpit they admit that readily, and yet when they write a story it looks as if they've never been at the UN before. They keep saying the UN has done this, has done that, no difference between Member States and the Secretariat, no difference between the Secretary-General and the General Assembly, no explanation of why certain things are obligatory even if they're not popular with the press. How about that?

WILLIAMS: Sometimes the criticisms are ill-informed. Often they're very accurate. Unfortunately, in the past, the UN as an institution has quite often treated the ill-informed criticisms and the informed criticisms on the same par -- they've objected to all criticism. Both of you have always responded eloquently when criticized, in so far as your masters allow you, and this is one of the points. We have an organization set up 50 years ago in the aftermath of World War Two. Sometimes I think it's the British influence here -- this is the type of British bureaucracy on which George Orwell modelled *1984*. There's a house culture of not speaking to the press, except through official spokesmen.

SILLS: I think it's not fair to say that the UN treats justified criticism and unjustified criticism the same way. I think that responsible people in the UN have been much more favourably inclined towards constructive criticism. But I think the point that François made is a very good one, and I'd like you to expand on it a little bit, your answer to it. It seems to me that so much of the press covering the UN -- not all of them, certainly there are some very good ones -- simply don't do their homework. They don't understand, or at least they don't reflect in their writing, that this is a complex organization. You would very rarely have anybody in Washington fail to distinguish between the Executive Branch and the Congress, but you have that all the time in writing about the UN, in failing, as François said, to distinguish between the different parts of the UN. I think the press doesn't do its homework as much as it should on the UN.

WILLIAMS: Well, in a sense we're lumping the UN into one homogenous institution when it has many different aspects, and you're doing the same to the press. People often come here to make a special about the UN, to do a special article about the UN, and I often find exactly what you're saying, that no matter how often you tell them

there's a difference between the General Assembly and the Security Council, they will go back with the same preconceived idea with which they came in. They've been sent here on a mission. But I think in general most of the press corps here at headquarters actually appreciate the differences and try to get those differences across. But then there also comes a point -- there are 185 Member States, and sometimes I think, I feel, that the United Nations blames them when the United Nations should actually stand up for itself. Instead of accepting what the Member States tell it, it should say, hey, we've got a Charter here.

SILLS: What do you mean by the UN? The Secretary-General?

WILLIAMS: The Secretariat.

GIULIANI: Ian, let me give you an example. Very recently, one of our high-ranking officials made some criticisms of one of the major Member States of the United Nations. The Ambassador of that Member State demanded his head on a platter. And I didn't hear that the press said, "No, he did the right thing, he was right in saying what he said." Not at all. They reported that he was a civil servant of the United Nations who had stepped out of line and had been slapped by the Ambassador, and that was quite right. That was the tenor of the articles. And that, quite frankly, explains to you why only spokesmen speak to the press and why officials are very wary, because --

WILLIAMS: Did the Secretariat and the Secretary-General get up and defend him, and say "This man is right, stop interfering."?

GIULIANI: They did. They did to the extent they could, but if the Member State has the purse in his hand and says, "Unless you agree with me, I'm going to cut your budget," -- you know, we have to be prudent.

WILLIAMS: I think there's almost a chicken and egg situation here. We allow a lot of ill-informed criticism here because the UN doesn't defend itself adequately in the host country, and that in a sense allows the people in Congress to cut the budget, because nobody knows about the UN.

GIULIANI: And if the UN defended itself and lost its budget, the press would be the first one to say that we were idiots --

WILLIAMS: Not all the press.

GIULIANI: -- and that we should have handled it much more diplomatically, I'm sure of that.

WILLIAMS: I think the point is that, over the years, ambassadors have got used to the UN doing what they're told, the Secretariat doing what its told by individual ambassadors. We have a bureaucracy here which, instead of being responsible to just one government, is responsible to 185, which obviously leads to some indecision sometimes.

But I would make a determined bid for independence, if ever you should be so foolish as to make me the Secretary-General! [LAUGHTER]

SILLS: Ian, to turn Michael's line about the shoe being on the other foot, I would be interested in knowing what you find are the toughest, most frustrating aspects of being a journalist covering the UN. What's the hardest part of the job?

WILLIAMS: The UN Correspondents Association recently held a seminar on precisely this point, really, because our first level of frustration is getting information out of the United Nations. So all of us have sources behind the doors. Envelopes come under the doors, telephone calls late at night to give us information that officially would not be released....

SILLS: But that's not unique to the UN, that's how journalists operate everywhere.

WILLIAMS: As far as I'm concerned -- yes. I mean, the UN could be better on this, but that's part of our job. I won't whinge about that because it's your job to hide the information and it's our job to find it. But the second level, I think, which is what our seminar was about, was how editors and producers look at the United Nations. And there I think we have a serious difficulty, because most of them, as you were saying before, don't understand the Organization. They don't see the differences. They can't see the complexity of it. And it's very difficult, here from headquarters, to, say.... When a Security Council resolution comes through, how do you relate that to what's happening out in the field, to the complexity of events in Bosnia or Somalia? Fifteen people get in a room and they vote for something. Do they mean it? Quite often, as you know full well, 15 members sit in the Security Council and they pass a resolution which they have no intention whatsoever of seeing implemented, just to placate public opinion back home. Well, how do you convey that?

SILLS: Will you say that in your stories?

WILLIAMS: I have, often, yes.

GIULIANI: But have your colleagues, though?

WILLIAMS: Once again, they find this difficulty with editors. Editors tend to be very highly respected people, and they mix with highly respected people, and they rely upon sources in the State Department and the Foreign Office in London and the Quai D'Orsay in France, and they don't want to burn those sources by saying "We don't believe a word you're saying."

GIULIANI: But don't you think there's a difference here between the different types of press? We keep saying the UN press, but you can't in fact even really compare an American correspondent and a British one. I mean, it's a different outlook on how you report the news. Certainly in European newspapers you are allowed to editorialize much

more than you are in the US, where you're supposed to report only the facts. And all the work of wire services, which --

SILLS: Supposed to, supposed to.

GIULIANI: Supposed to.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's one of the complexities I was talking about which we in fact dealt with in the seminar we held, because, well, the correspondents of some of the newspapers of record here in the United States tell me that when the US Mission feeds them a line of propaganda which they say is useless and they're not going to use, those people have no difficulty at all in phoning up columnists in Washington in the same newspaper and getting the story in that way. And it's -- the press is a complex body as well.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ian, you spoke about British influence, or alleged British influence on the UN bureaucracy, implying that somehow or other the bureaucracy is less open because of the British pattern. It seems to me that that's not quite true. Here in the United States, in New York, the headquarters fortunately being in New York, the communications centre of the world, you might say, it seems to me that the UN is far more open than it would be if it were located in London or Paris or Bonn, or whatever.

WILLIAMS: What I meant by being "frozen in time", a lot of British officials were involved in setting up the UN, and they come with the experience of the League of Nations. That's why British English, of course, is the official English at the United Nations. But 50 years later, the British bureaucracy back in Britain is actually much more open, I think, whereas here it's to some extent frozen --

LITTLEJOHNS: More open than the American bureaucracy?

WILLIAMS: Well, one of the least accessible missions here for getting information from is the US Mission. You call up the US Mission and they refer you to the press officer. The British or the French, if you want to find out what's happening about Bosnia, you phone the desk officer in the Mission directly. It's not just the UN that has this culture, there are a lot of people in the vicinity.

GIULIANI: Well, don't you think it's a diplomatic culture, generally? Diplomats, foreign ministers, foreign ministries cannot really come out with all sorts of comments and sound bites for journalists. Diplomacy is a serious business, it's not something that you conduct in the newspaper. And I can understand why the ambassadors don't want to say certain things. I can understand why civil servants, whether they are from the diplomatic corps or the UN, aren't ready to betray confidence or to give out information which would look pretty good for a journalist to put in a paper but which would wreck a negotiation. You have to look at it from the other side.

WILLIAMS: Well, as I said before, in one sense it's their job to try and keep it secret, and it's our job to try and find it. One of the UN's principles was against secret treaties and secret diplomacy, in a sense. All treaties have to be lodged here at headquarters to make sure that no secret deals are cooked up inside. And I think if that's true about the final product, to a large extent it's true about the process of cooking up treaties: there should be as much transparency as possible.

LITTLEJOHNS: You gentlemen, with tremendous experience as spokesmen, one current and the other former, do you feel that you're getting enough information from the top levels of the Organization? Is it difficult, is it frustrating for you to get hold of important --

SILLS: Mike, I've never known a spokesman in his or her life who felt that they were getting enough information. You know, it is a constant battle to get information from within your own organization, and then to have permission to use that information and give as much to the press corps. Traditionally they don't want to give you as much as you want, and then, of what they do give you, they don't want you to use very much. And any spokesman or spokeswoman has to overcome that.

In my own case, I think it's better now than it was when I started in this job. I think you try to build a certain amount of credibility, and the more credibility you build the more open people are to you within your own organization. But it's a constant problem. And I know one of the major complaints of the press corps about the Spokesman's Office is that we do not make enough information available. I think in some cases they feel that we perhaps hold it up, but in more cases I think they feel it's because we don't have it available ourselves.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is a special edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ian Williams, President of the United Nations Correspondents Association. Ian, you want to take it from there?

WILLIAMS: Well, we're coming back to the points that we were talking about earlier -- the house culture. The house culture is inimical to releasing information, and I know that Joe does a valiant job, but it's our job to try and find that information. Unfortunately, there's a house rule that officially says that staff aren't allowed to talk to the press. It's ignored most of the time, I'm pleased to say, but it's always there hovering. Things have improved a lot now, but a year or two ago I think relations between the press and the Secretariat hit a very low point. The whole issue is precisely freedom of the press, and different conceptions of it.

SILLS: I think one of the areas that has improved dramatically is access at the senior level, at the under-secretary-general and assistant secretary-general level. And I

think many of those people are much more available to the press than they have been. But I think it's understandable for an organization to want people at policy-making levels to make statements about policy, rather than people at lower levels who don't have that responsibility.

WILLIAMS: One of the aspects which I've been dealing with, of course, is that the United Nations has its own legal system. It's extra-territorial.

SILLS: That's true.

WILLIAMS: So quite often -- well, let's say on occasion there have been injustices within the system, and people who have been, say, unjustly dismissed or unjustly suspended, or in one way or another victimized, find it very difficult.... If they were on the other side of First Avenue in New York, they could go to the courts; here, they can't. And I like to think the press is sort of the jury of last resort for staff members who have been treated unjustly.

SILLS: If I had to name one area which I think has been blown out of proportion by the media here, I think that would be it. There's a very complicated and thorough in-house system for dealing with this sort of thing. And I think maybe this refers back to what François was talking about earlier, how there's been a personalization within some of the reporting, which I think is unfortunate.

WILLIAMS: There are some senior officials here who have done things for which they would have been prosecuted if they were outside.

SILLS: I won't deny that there are some cases that come up. They will in any organization. But I think they've really been blown out of proportion by the press in several cases.

WILLIAMS: Well, myself doubtless having blown some of them out of proportion in your view --

SILLS: Yes, well, I didn't want to name you specifically. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAMS: These were serious injustices that were perpetrated by people, and I and others who were involved in cases like this gave them an opportunity to present their case. And, as I said, these cases would have been prosecuted, they would have been fought out in the law courts outside. Staff can't do that. And in that sense I felt that -- several of us feel that this is part of our job, to hold officials responsible.

SILLS: You're ignoring the internal avenues that --

WILLIAMS: Well, as you said, it's complicated. And we're talking 10 years.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you and other senior people in the Secretariat from the Secretary-General on down feel that there's hostility on the part of the press toward individuals and the UN as an organization?

GIULIANI: I wouldn't say hostility to the UN as an organization. What worries me sometimes is that if you talk to the journalists on a day-to-day basis, they're quite understanding of the problems of the UN, they're quite supportive, and they have excellent relations with the members of the Secretariat. But then, when they get on their soapboxes and become rather highly moral and judgemental about everything, they lose sight of that perspective, and they start sort of losing sight of what the UN is about, and how it came about, and what the various balance of power is within the UN. And when you lose sight of that, you don't understand the Organization any more, so that you end up writing very skewed stories -- and I've seen a few of those in my life.

WILLIAMS: Well, I rather think it's our job to do this. It's our job to goad the Organization.

GIULIANI: To be skewed? No, surely not.

WILLIAMS: To be accurate as possible, but it's our.... There is this Organization, it's publicly accountable to the peoples of the world, and it's our job to ride our moral high horse, to say that you have departed from this code of ethics you've set yourself, that you should have done this. And that's no detriment to the individuals involved.

GIULIANI: I think there is also a tendency on the part of certain staff members who are disgruntled to go to the press with a highly partial version of something and sell it quite easily to the journalists. I have seen stories which were reported totally partially, and I'm sorry to say that.... You know, I know we always hear about the press doing its job, impartial -- yes, sure, of course; but when it seizes something that's thrown at them from a very, very suspect source and then runs with it, then I have a problem.

WILLIAMS: We might even be talking about the same story. But in my experience, when a disgruntled staff member comes to me, I'll make a presumption that there's a monstrous grudge involved, and I check out with their colleagues, with other people, what axe are they grinding? Is their story true? And I will always do that. Because in a complex bureaucracy, a hierarchy like the UN, I always assume that.... There are a lot of people, for example, who have been fighting for promotion for years, and if they put as much effort into actually doing their job as they do into fighting for promotion and holding grudges, they might have got promoted. I'm aware of these. And I personally am always very, very careful, when I get a grudge like this, to examine it very carefully.

GIULIANI: I'm not talking about the same story you're talking about.

SILLS: But it does seem in a lot of these cases, Ian, that it's sort of a case of a journalist mounting a horse and not wanting to get off it once they start riding, and they

beat it to death. And I really feel that this reporting in the UN is overdone by journalists. I think a lot of it is the old Woodward and Bernstein mentality. You know, you don't get anywhere in journalism, or you rarely get anywhere, by simply reporting a good news story very well. You get somewhere by digging up dirt, by finding the bad news, by making public officials or entertainment people or literary people look bad, and what have you. And I think that's a real question for journalism, not just at the UN. I really would like to see the old-fashioned solid news story and solid news writer get a little more credit for that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Joe, something which doesn't seem to be exactly beaten to death, at least so far, is the United Nations fiftieth anniversary celebrations, which seem to have been more or less ignored by the media. What's the failure there? Are the media just not interested, in your experience?

GIULIANI: No, no.

SILLS: No, I disagree completely. I think there, Michael, first of all, you're looking too much at the US media. There's been tremendous coverage around the world -- special programmes, special series of the fiftieth anniversary. There have been some in this country, understandably in San Francisco, which is where the Charter was signed. There's been a very fine multi-part series in the San Francisco Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you're not unhappy with the coverage?

SILLS: Well, I'm never totally happy with the way it's gone, but no, I think that there's been some good coverage. There will be much more as we approach the fall. And -- this is what I was talking about earlier -- I hope and we hope there will be some constructive criticism, some criticism that will point not just to what's being done badly but to where we can move in the future.

WILLIAMS: I've got to say, I've seen a lot of TV programmes based on the fiftieth anniversary, and I'm sure less with Joe and François, who are more seasoned --

LITTLEJOHNS: But not here in the United States.

WILLIAMS: I've taken part in three in Britain, and I think there are two on the stocks in America. And most of these --

GIULIANI: Now there are people wandering around the building doing series about the UN....

WILLIAMS: I think there was a state of shock in some parts of it, because they thought that somehow the media were going to cover a big fiftieth birthday party and everyone was going to blow the candles out in front of the Secretariat building, and of course that's not happened. I think in general the media have risen to the occasion, and what they've done, instead of just treating it as a history and a celebration, they've taken

this as an opportunity to look at what the UN is doing and what it should be doing. And this has often been critical. And mostly I think it's been constructively critical.

GIULIANI: Wait a minute. The Secretary-General himself said that he did not want the fiftieth anniversary to be a celebration --

SILLS: That's what I was going to say.

GIULIANI: -- but to be the start of a process of thinking about the UN, where it has been, where it's going. I think that that's unfair, to assume that we were --

WILLIAMS: No, I said certain naive people in here. I've heard a sort of state of shock, "Did you see that programme that criticized us?"

GIULIANI: No, Joe and I are not naive.

SILLS: No, I -- I --

WILLIAMS: No, I knew that you weren't. [LAUGH]

SILLS: I didn't read that in, and I think the fiftieth is one instance, a particular instance where the way the press is approaching it and the expectations and desires of the UN that it be approached are very close together. And I agree, not only the media coverage, but there's been a great deal of work in academic circles, seminars and very serious papers and symposia --

WILLIAMS: Oh, they've been very serious. I've been on a lot of these panels!

SILLS: -- that I think will have a continuing effect. So I can only wish every UN story were covered that way, as the fiftieth....

WILLIAMS: Then I get on my soapbox. You must remember, as part of the press corps, I think most of the press corps, certainly at the headquarters, are sort of well disposed towards the UN and its ideals. But we have to sometimes remind ourselves that -- -- if I can get on my soapbox -- it's "Friends, Romans, countrymen, we come to cover the UN, not to praise it." Our job is not to act as a field extension of the Department of Public Information.

SILLS: That's absolutely proper. I have no problem at all with that, and all we ask is that you cover it fairly and do your homework. I've never asked that the press be a cheering section for the UN. I don't think that would do a service to the UN or to the press corps.

GIULIANI: We've never claimed that the Organization was perfect, either, but I think that the great frustration is really when you see that people -- and after all, the press corps at the UN is very close to the UN -- do not try to understand its limitations and its scope and its mandate. And that is very frustrating, to judge an organization of people for what they should be doing when that's never been their mandate or the intention that they should be doing....

WILLIAMS: That's the point I was making before. I think in general the correspondents at headquarters are aware of what you're talking about. But we're dealing with editors, we're dealing with producers, and they think they know what they want, and what they want needn't necessarily match with reality.

SILLS: You're also dealing with correspondents in the field. That's one of the biggest problems with peace-keeping coverage, the either failure or unwillingness to consider what the mandates of a peace-keeping force are, which define what it can do and what it can't do. And you have story after story excoriating the UN peace-keeping force for not doing something that is in no way within its mandate.

WILLIAMS: But sometimes I think some of this criticism is justified, because I think in various operations the UN has sort of forgotten that the UN Charter and the Covenant on Human Rights are part of its mandate.

LITTLEJOHNS: Joe, in that context, what was your response to the Peter Jennings ABC programme which was quite, quite critical of the operation in Bosnia, and specifically of General Michael Rose?

SILLS: Well, my response is to say I thought we were interviewing Ian, but....

[LAUGHTER]

The programme -- well, it demonstrates a very big point, or a difficult point about television journalism. I thought it was a good programme from a journalistic standpoint. I thought in many ways it was a very unfair programme. They interviewed the US Ambassador, Madeleine Albright, for one hour; they used one sentence. They interviewed Sir Michael Rose and Shashi Tharoor, Shashi from our staff, and General Rose was Force Commander in Bosnia. And I haven't talked to Rose, I've talked to Mr. Tharoor, and he said that point after point that he made in the interview which would refute specific points that were made in that programme were cut out and not used. We had a terrible experience with 60 Minutes, the CBS television programme, here a couple of years ago, in which they absolutely brutalized the statements that senior officials had made and cut out all of their responses and answers and intentionally made them look as bad as they could. I have a problem, and no television person, I think, is going to give up the right to edit, no producer is going to give up the right to edit, and I don't know how we reconcile that. But that was my big problem with that programme.

LITTLEJOHNS: Gentlemen, that's all the time we have. You've done a great job. Thank you for being with us on this special edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ian Williams, President of the United Nations Correspondents Association. He was interviewed by Joe Sills, Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, and François Giuliani, Director of the Media Division of the UN Department of

Public Information. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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